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Managing Group Travel

Barker, Julie. Successful Meetings. New York: Feb 1992. Vol.41, Iss. 2; pg. 106, 3 pgs

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The typical Fortune 1000 company does not know how much it spends on travel to meetings. However, based on a survey conducted by [@American Express](#), controlling group travel costs is a priority of top executives at more than 2/3 of these companies. If corporations want to manage their group travel costs, they must first identify what is happening in travel management throughout the company, says James Kelly, director of [@American Express](#) Group and Incentive Services (AEGIS). Kelly's solution is a simple procedure that AEGIS now offers as a service. However, any company might adapt the idea and introduce it internally. The AEGIS product, called The First Step, is a database management service targeted for multilocation firms that have more than 100 meetings annually. The planner, before anything else is set, calls AEGIS for a meeting registration number, then codes all purchases and invoices for that particular meeting with that number. AEGIS then compiles consolidated management information services reports to give the client buying and usage data that can help reduce costs.

Full Text (1277 words)*Copyright Bill Communications Feb 1992*

The typical Fortune 1000 company hasn't got a clue how much it actually spends on travel to meetings. But based on a recent survey conducted by [@American Express](#), controlling group travel costs is a priority of top executives at more than two-thirds of Fortune 1000 companies. It stands to reason that there's some frustration at high levels over the difficulty of getting a handle on what is being spent and where.

Three or four years ago, few companies thought group travel costs could be managed in the same way business travel is. According to James Kelly, director of [@American Express](#) Group & Incentive Services (AEGIS) in Norcross, Georgia, now there's an understanding at high levels in corporate America that meeting costs are a controllable item. That doesn't mean upper management is pointing the finger at meeting planners. "I don't think it's

a matter of meeting planners making mistakes," says Kelly. "It's a matter of everybody taking a broader view than just the next meeting."

In the companies @American Express surveyed, some 80 percent of the meetings are planned by individuals who do not have meeting planning as their primary function. These people are also the ones who approve the invoices and forward them to the accounting department for payment. In a large company that has thousands of meetings a year, some very basic controls are necessary before these costs can be managed.

SIMPLE CODING METHOD

"If corporations want to manage their group travel costs, the first step is they have to identify what's happening in travel management throughout the company," says Kelly. Using the corporate travel department to make all group travel purchases is one solution. Another is to use an outside travel agency to handle negotiations and air ticketing, and to provide expense management data as well.

However, says Kelly, "A lot of companies don't want to have guidelines that say 'you must use this agency.' They want the people who are organizing the meetings internally to continue to do it themselves. But they still want to get the information (on numbers of meetings booked, numbers of attendees, where meetings are being held, and how people are getting there) so they can figure out a better way to manage things."

Kelly's solution is a simple procedure that AEGIS now offers as a service. However, any company might adapt the idea and introduce it internally. The AEGIS product, called The First Step, is a database management service targeted for multi-location firms that have more than 100 meetings per year. Clients who subscribe to The First Step need no equipment, no special knowledge. The planner--before anything else is set--calls AEGIS for a meeting registration number, then codes all purchases and invoices for that particular meeting with that number. Invoices go through the normal channels in the corporation. AEGIS compiles consolidated management information services (MIS) reports to give the client buying and usage data that can help reduce costs.

Once a company knows how much group business its meetings are bringing to individual airlines or hotel chains, it has identified its buying power, and can begin to negotiate group discounts. Once a company knows its purchasing habits, it can go about eliminating duplication and waste. One @American Express client discovered through an MIS report that on a single day in Chicago, it was holding five different meetings in five different hotels.

"Most companies also don't know what they're spending per person or per day or per program for different types of meetings," says Kelly. "We're able to provide that information to them."

CLAMPDOWN COMING?

At Fortune 1000 corporations, the concern over controlling group travel costs is growing. The 1991 @American Express Survey of Group Business Travel Management indicates that 70 percent of the companies responding view controlling group travel costs as a high priority. That figure has increased 21 percent since the last survey, in 1989. Very likely, then, changes will begin to occur in the way group travel is shopped for, negotiated for, and bought.

This trend has important implications for full-time meeting planners looking for ways to advance their careers, as well as for those who plan meetings as just a small part of their jobs. A planner who can identify costs and then consolidate buying to produce savings over a period of time may well satisfy an important corporate goal. To do this, the meeting planner should enlist help from the corporate travel department or the company's travel agent.

Although in many companies there is some traditional jealousy between meeting planners and corporate travel managers, Kelly says he thinks it is appropriate for corporate travel managers to get involved in the air ticketing and site selection for meetings. "The meeting planners do a very good job," says Kelly. "They understand how to impart the content of the meeting. They should not feel threatened by getting the assistance of the corporate travel manager or whoever else understands the bigger picture."

Pricing for The First Step is quoted on an individual basis, depending on the extent of services the client wants. For a copy of the 1991 @American Express Survey of Group Business Travel Management, call (800) 999-AMEX.

GUIDELINES

THE COMPETITIVE EDGE

1 PERSONALLY INVITE KEY PROSPECTS TO YOUR EXHIBIT.

Fifty to 75 percent of the people you speak to will come to your booth. Bear in mind that personal calls to upper management, as opposed to mid-level decision-makers, are seldom made but can be very effective.

2 FIND OUT YOUR PROSPECTS' AGENDA BEFORE DESIGNING YOUR EXHIBIT.

Mail a survey to 100 prospects likely to visit the show, asking them to identify three key issues they're concerned about. Design your exhibit around their responses instead of general product displays. Send out mailers to all prospects saying these messages will be addressed at your booth.

3 BUILD A NETWORKING ENVIRONMENT.

Prospects love to meet an exhibitor's customers, reasoning that they can find out more by talking to actual users than to salespeople. Again, let prospects know that this opportunity is available. For example, one computer company sends out notices before a show stating: "Our customers are staffing our booth. Come meet with them and discuss applications and experiences."

4 PUT MANAGEMENT TOGETHER WITH PROSPECTS. When prospects are unsure about making a purchase, they need reinforcement that they are making the right decision. Since lack of trust and confidence is often what causes resistance, bringing in senior management helps confirm the commitment from your company. Team-selling with management can overcome a prospect's apprehension and expedite the decision.

5 CONSISTENTLY EXHIBIT.

Exhibiting at a time when your competitors are cutting back gives you a clear opening to influence your competitors' customers. When customers see a withdrawal from the marketplace, they question a company's commitment, viability, and performance. Every dollar spent during uncertain times has proven to yield a threefold return in long-term business.

6 TAP INTO THE REFERRALS MARKET.

Most of your customers can identify two or three people who could use your products or service. A common mistake, however, is to blatantly ask for names. This triggers a negative perception from the customer who worries that people referred will be bothered by the salesperson. Instead, ask for names of people you can send a newsletter to, or those who might appreciate receiving samples or tips to help improve productivity. This encourages a "helping perception," which will result in more names. A minimum of 20 percent of a salesperson's business should come from referrals: Trade shows are an excellent place to start.

Dr. Allen Konapacki is president of Incomm, a sales training and research center, based in Chicago, Illinois. He is author of the book *The Dynamics of Trade Show Selling*.

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